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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Sudanese Journalists Strike Against  
Censorship

¶1. U) SUMMARY: Sudanese dailies Ajras Al Hurriya and Rai Al Shaab, in a show of solidarity with 46 modern-minded "democratic" columnists, took up a protest on November 4 against increasing censorship by state security organs, which have censored the editorial content of the publications. The dailies both confirm that they halted publication for three days, November 5-7, to protest what they view as an infringement on press freedom. Staff members of both newspapers staged a 24-hour hunger strike that ended at 1:00 pm, November 5. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) None of Khartoum's pro-government newspapers reported on this protest. The only Khartoum daily to provide coverage was independent, English-language "Khartoum Monitor."

¶3. (U) "Sudaneseonline.com" noted on November 5: "Publishers of two Sudanese dailies say they will stop printing their newspapers for three days to protest state censorship. Salah Kajem, publisher of the independent pro-south daily Freedom Bells, says government agents often come at night and order the removal of articles, citing security concerns. His paper and another, affiliated with an Islamist opposition leader, will halt publication until Friday. Other journalists said Tuesday they are planning a 24-hour hunger strike in protest. There was no immediate government comment. Lawyers say they have challenged the new wave of censorship, which started in February, with a law suit in the constitutional court." The same website ran an AFP report noting that Sudanese journalists had launched a mass hunger strike on Tuesday, and that three independent newspapers had stopped work for three days in the country's biggest organized media protest against censorship.

¶4. (U) Charge d'Affaires Fernandez, accompanied by the PAO, visited Ajras Al-Hurriya on November 6 to express U.S. Government support for press freedom in Sudan. Editor-in-Chief Murtada Elghali Elgaali Hussain, who participated in a 2006 Post-funded program for Human Rights Advocates, and Director of the Board Deng Goc, provided an overview of the newspaper's standing with the Press and Publications Council, indicating that there are 17 cases pending against them. They noted a particular taboo was any criticism of the much-touted (by the regime) Sudan People's Initiative (SPI), which is supposed to try to solve the Darfur crisis.

¶7. (SUB) COMMENT: With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, which ended the two-decade long war between the north and south, media censorship was significantly eased, particularly in the south. However, in recent months, especially since the JEM rebel attack on Omdurman in May 2008, the GoS has begun to restrict print journalists' ability to publish freely. With Presidential elections in Sudan scheduled for 2009, State security mechanisms are gradually tightening their grip on media. Their intent appears to be to limit the range of issues covered in the press, accustom journalists to repression and self-censorship and also stifle any points of view that differ with the GoS. In response, this week's protest by the three newspapers seeks to call public awareness to this rise in censorship. According to editors,

their next step will be to stop publication of any single issue in which the censors cut three columns or more.

FERNANDEZ